

An encouraging letter

To teach, encourage, and lift up

a

Dark, dead, fainthearted person,

Wrestling under the power of indwelling sin

Written by

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1 Cor. 1:10

Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and *that* there be no divisions among you, but *that* ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.

Jas 3:16-18

For where envying and strife *is*, there *is* confusion and every evil work. But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, *and* easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace.

Written to a God seeking person, though in darkness, deadness, barrenness, and living under the power of corruptions.

My dear friend!

The beginning, the middle and the end of the salvation of man is solely of God. Man can do nothing towards it, and he can do nothing in the beginning, namely when God finds a person blind, dead and unwilling. Finding him in such a condition, God appears before him, only because of his free grace. He sends his

Holy Spirit, who takes up residence in his heart (in *his* heart and not someone else's) and works very distinctively. He works differently in one person than in another person. So that you cannot draw conclusions from someone else's conversion. You should not say: 'I am not saved in the same way as such and such a person, *therefore* I am not converted. Some people have a speedy conversion, as in one day. Some people are slowly converted and have many preparatory workings, but life comes in an instant, and he passes from death to life. But it is hard, if not impossible, to know that moment. You should not be concerned about it. Some are converted with joy, other people with fright, fear or depressing and continual sorrows. Some by seeing the truth, which brings the heart *to* that truth, without much joy or sorrow, but with calmness. Just as it is God's work *alone* to convert a person, so it is God *alone* Who makes him work (having received life). The spiritual man moves by the influence and the movement of the Holy Spirit, sometimes this way, at another time another way, such as pleases Him, but *no* other way. If you want to have a resolute course and give God alone the glory for your life and salvation, you must understand, notice and believe this.

Learn this from scripture and from your own experience. Sink deep into the sense of your own inability. Say: 'I cannot. Neither can I move God on my own to do something for me by my spiritual frames, nor by my works, nor by my prayers. Me, damnable, desperate wretch!

You know that God is just, that he cannot leave sin unpunished, and that he has given his own Son to be a surety¹. Also that he, who is called and invited by Christ, and to whom Christ offers himself to be his Saviour, must believe that there is salvation in Christ, that he must desire that salvation, and that he, in answer to that offer, must accept him to be his ransom and justification, in order to be justified and obtain salvation solely by *this* ransom and justification, without his own works, by free grace alone; and that he is obliged to surrender himself blindly to Jesus, and to trust himself to Him, however sinful, damnable and unable he is. So that he may carry and lead him in such a way towards heaven as he pleases.

You shall say: 'I cannot. It is impossible for me. I also have but little desire to do so.' That is correct, you are speaking the truth. But know this, that faith is not an assurance that Christ is your Saviour, but it is to agree with that offer [of Christ], and an acceptance of it. Yes, to be content to be justified by Jesus, reconciled with God, and saved by Him. Freely, without anything of your own. This does not happen with thoughtlessly saying: 'I would want him to work this in me.' But it is

¹ Heb. 7:22.

an outgoing desire of the heart towards Jesus, a negotiation of the heart with Him, wherein the soul tells him about her misery. It is believing in the fullness of Jesus for supplying all her needs, her desire to have Jesus for her ransom and justification and to surrender herself to Him.

You must know thereby, that the heart is not to be understood as the most sensitive desire coming from a clear view, enjoyment, taste and sense of the matter. It is a misunderstanding of many, who judge that they do not desire these things in truth, if they do not have these sensitive desires.

But the heart is the rational will. Reason is neither to be understood as the clear light, nor as ecstatic or blissful light, revealing spiritual things, God, Christ, etc. immediately in its clearness, amiability, etc., so that you feel its power in your heart. No, that is reserved for heaven; scripture calls it 'to see'². On the other hand there is the knowledge *by faith*, by which you can know God, Christ, etc. just as he reveals himself in the Word. In his Word you can hear what God says about himself and his Son, you believe that it is the truth, only because God says so in his Word. Here many believers go astray and damage themselves, because they do not consider the knowledge of the truths of the Word of God, only because *he* says it is the truth, as such knowledge. They strain their brains, they want to climb to a higher degree, they want to taste and feel. If they cannot do that, and if they get more and more into darkness in the strain or labours of their brains (as is commonly the result of these strains and labours) they become despondent or depressed, and neglect to work with the knowledge from the Word. They are little occupied with trusting themselves to Jesus, they throw away their state of grace, and life in anxiety. They consider the knowledge from the Word merely as knowing the letter, with which natural man occupy themselves; because they place the difference between 'head knowledge' and spiritual enlightenment in visible gleams [of the Spirit], even though the knowledge of the Word consists in power.

'Head knowledge' sticks with the letter, and is satisfied with mere knowledge, but spiritual enlightenment reveals to a person his own self, convinces him of sin and perplexes him. Spiritual enlightenment reveals Jesus Christ as the Mediator, and creates a desire to be a partaker of Jesus' atoning merits, and a turning of himself towards him, looking upon him, accepting him and surrendering of himself to him, to lay himself and his salvation in his hands, and to trust all things to Him, because God says, commands and promises so in his Word. Thus accepting Jesus, this knowledge has power to cause a loathing of sin and to generate a love to the will

² 1 Cor. 13:12.

of God, to be submissive to that will, to live a life that pleases Him, in humility, fear and obedience; not to earn something from God, or to move God to give us Christ; but only because he takes pleasure in doing the will of God. This is true holiness.

It is easy to say these things, and it should go on easily, but the old nature is still within. That nature retains its movements, and sometimes it has great powers. At times it appears to be almost dead. Occasionally, in the beginning of conversion, the power of sin seems to be broken, because there is a great earnestness to be reconciled with God, to be a partaker of Christ, to have a godly life, but when that earnestness weakens, and the conflicts with respect to the truths, his state, and holiness, prevail, the old nature gains ground, captures that small spiritual life, dominates it, and breaks through to commit several inward and also outward sins, in secret, but sometimes it happens that he also shows himself acting sinful outwardly. Even as if there were no grace at all. The spiritual life is fainter. There is no movement. The Lord loosens his hand. He seems to cast him away and to deny him all graces.

There lies that poor little creature, and it gets to know by its own experience its inability to believe, to repent, to oppose sin, to do anything that is good, yea, to will. It learns to say: 'If God does not intervene, if he gives me no life and faith, then I am undone, and I think that he will not intervene, but that I shall be damned forever. Yes, damnation does not frighten me. Salvation is not amiable to me. I am dead. There is to all eternity no mercy prepared for me anymore.'

But in this saddest condition something of the life of grace still manifests itself, namely:

1. There is and remains a sight of his misery, with a remaining heaviness or oppressiveness of the heart because of that sinful state, want of spiritual light, absence of God and want of peace in his conscience by faith in Christ. And if the vehemency of conflict, the temptation to sin, and insensible uselessness hinder thinking of God and himself, this anxiety and languishing sadness comes up as soon as he starts to think of God again: it is not the fear to be damned, but it is the absence of God and the life with God, which causes this sadness. This sick soul would not be sad about this condition, if there were no light, life, spirit and faith within, and even if anyone in that perplexed condition could find out that there is grace in his heart, yet, he cannot believe it with respect to himself, either because of his despondency, or because of a groundless fear to deceive

himself, if he would believe that there is grace within, which I rather consider to be sadness and discontented objections because of his fear to deceive himself.

2. There is and remains some knowledge of spiritual light, life, love, godliness, wrestling to believe, and to walk with and before God, with respect to the Lord Jesus. Even though the soul does not have it, yet she knows that this is amiable and desirable. She knows an incomparable distinction between that spiritual and natural religion at best. This cannot satisfy her, she does not want this. She does not consider them happy, who think they are so virtuous, because she sees that spiritual life and communion with Christ is lacking. She recognizes the voice of Jesus and that of nature. She must have Jesus for her justification, in Jesus she must be, she must live and be godly. 'Ah! I would have it!' she sighs, 'but I lack it.'
3. There is and remains a choice between the godly and the ungodly, between converted and unconverted, no matter how virtuous they are outwardly. Although they are not infallibly convinced of someone's converted state, yet they see and recognize those who *appear* to be converted, and speak the language of Canaan, and those who counterfeit this language. Hence comes a desire for the one and a loathing of the other. Though they do not consider themselves converted, yet they desire to associate with the converted. Not because of their virtue and good character, because of which an unconverted person may love a godly person, but because they know, love and seek the Lord Jesus, and have his Spirit. Therefore no one can love another godly person if he has no greater love for Jesus himself. Though he cannot believe that he loves Jesus, yet he has to conclude it from his love to the godly people because they love Jesus. Hence he may conclude that he has passed from death to life.
4. Generally a converted person experiences intervals during that perplexed state. At times he sadly directs his eyes towards heaven, whether there is mercy, and whether it may please the Lord to make him a partaker of Christ. He looks to and fro; he sighs. Sometimes he becomes dreary, and melts away in tears. There come powerful prayers, and thus he thinks: 'I am saved.' Now he thinks that he may gently go ahead, but scarcely he turns himself, and he is in his old condition again. These intervals show that there is grace hidden in their hearts, which shows itself when it gets even a little space, just like the stars - they appear when the clouds are but a little driven away, but are clouded again in a moment.

After having read this, you can answer your question. The question is whether someone in the condition that you have described, can still be a ‘maybe he has grace’. I answer: ‘when he sees the things above mentioned in himself, *he possesses grace*, even if he were twice as miserable as you have described.’ Wake up from your despondency. Lift up your head out of your needs. Lay hold of your strength again, and begin as in former times.

Are you not sin within and without? Are you not within and without malicious, disgusting and damnable? How do you judge yourself? Is it not thus? Do you take pleasure in that condition? Is that your joy and pleasure? Or do you spend your life in deep sadness, anxiety of heart, sorrow, so that you scarcely know what joy is? And what is the cause of your languishing? Is it the concerns with respect to this life? Or is it with respect to your sinful frame or condition, the want of Christ and with respect to the life in absence of God? And what could ease and satisfy your soul? Would it be anything else other than Jesus, Gods favour, a spiritual frame and a godly conduct? Then you may conclude that your concern is about God, and that your sorrow is towards God.³ Do you want to be delivered from your sad and sinful state, if it were your choice? Do you say cordially: ‘Yes, but it is impossible to me, I neither can mourn aright, nor repent, nor go to God, nor accept Christ for my ransom and justification. I’m in a deep, steep pit, I cannot come out. People want to help, teach, comfort and support me, but all in vain. I remain the same person as I was. God can help me, but does not want to. Therefore I am depressed and like a dead man, without sense because of that despondency, and that without a clear understanding of things. It is as if I do not want to be helped. I neither have fright, nor desire. It is as if I do not have the understanding of man⁴. I only know this, that I am miserable, and that there neither is hope nor help, and that I wish I were different. Thus you see your misery and inability to be saved. You will say: ‘what does this help?’ I shall show it to you.

Read and ~~re~~read these four points above mentioned. Do not consult your affections, but act wisely. May the Lord give you the ability to judge the case and yourself aright. are you in that state, as you say in your letter, and these four points are not truly in you: I say *truly*, and I do not speak of the degree, then rest assured that all comes merely from outward enlightenment, and that there is yet no true grace in you. Take heed that you do not neglect your time

³ Dutch Staten Translation. The KJV reads: ‘godly sorrow’

⁴ Prov. 30:2.

of conversion. Imagination does not help you here, despondency does not avail here. Therefore, flee from the wrath to come. Christ still calls you. The door of mercy shall soon be shut. Awake, thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead⁵. If you say: 'I cannot' I answer: I know that, but I say this to you, so that it may please God to work it in you. Just as Christ said to dead Lazarus: 'Lazarus, come forth' and he raised him up by that word. It is still your duty. Therefore, be earnest with regard to this solemn matter. But if you are truly in the state that you have expressed in your letter, these four things are within you:

1. Are you sad, depressed and sorrowful because of your sinful condition, the want of Christ and the alienation from God. Can nothing comfort you other than the reconciliation with God, and having Christ for your ransom and justification, and the life of faith in Christ, in the peace of conscience and true godliness?
2. Do you still know the voice of Jesus, the spiritual frame of a believer, a struggling, God seeking, God fearing and God serving soul? Is that frame amiable to you and is natural religion, holiness and virtue (not flowing from the union with Christ, through faith for justification) nothing in your estimation, but condemnable? Do you know the distinction between Spirit and spiritual things on the one hand, and nature and natural religion on the other hand; with approval of, and longing for the first, and detestation and rejection of the latter?
3. Are you on the side of Jesus, his sake and children, contrary to the world and worldly things? Would you rather suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy all the prosperity, calmness, honor and riches with worldly, virtuous, natural and moral people, or followers of a false religion? And that because of love to the truth, and because true godly people love, seek and serve Jesus?
4. Are there (though short) intervals, accompanied with cordial prayers, meltings of heart, decisions, comforts, looking unto Jesus, fleeing to him and wrestlings with regard to accepting Him?

I say: do you find these things in you? Then that is a sign that you have true grace, though covered with temptations, corruptions, depressions, resentment, and the like; because in these frames spiritual light, love, life and faith manifests itself.

⁵ Ef. 5:14.

You can find the foundation of these four points in the following chapters:

Thesis 1: Mat. 5:1-11; Is. 57:15-18; Is. 54: 6-11.

Thesis 2: John 14:17; John 10:4, 5, 14, 27, 28.

Thesis 3: Hebr. 11:24-27; 1 John 2:16; 1 John 3:14.

Thesis 4: Mat. 5:6; John 6:40; John 3: 36; Mic. 6:7-9.

Establish and ascertain these texts, because they are the Words of the God of truth. Compare your condition with these texts, without any prejudice regarding yourself; as if you were to judge someone else's condition. Is there nothing in you that corresponds to these things, then fear, and let the terror of the Lord persuade you to believe⁶.

But if these points correspond with your condition, and describe your present condition - then know, that neither nature nor outward enlightenment has wrought that frame in you, but that it is a work of the indwelling Holy Spirit, who is the security or surety of the everlasting inheritance. Do not deny the work of the Spirit, neither by a wrong humility, which does not dare to credit that much to itself, (which secretly supposes that you have come that far by your own power) nor by discontented resistance, denying that which you have received, nor by despondency, so that you are not willing to be comforted, nor by fear to deceive yourselves. O, deal tenderly with the workings of grace of the Holy Spirit. Is there grace in you? Rejoice, because it will remain in you, no matter how hid and opposed it is. Be comforted by it, so that you may forget those things which are behind and reach forth again unto those things which are before⁷. The recognition of grace enlivens much.

Furthermore I shall prescribe no means, because it is impossible that they can do anything for you in this condition, but let me earnestly suggest to you that you are laborious to do all whatsoever your hand finds to do with your might⁸. The strength of the soul and body shall be wasted by idleness. The brains wear out. The fantasy or imagination becomes spoiled and is hindered to judge aright and act wisely. The body comes into a bad disposition, and becomes slow and languid. The corruptions will have their opportunity, space and

⁶ 2 Cor. 5:11, Dutch Staten Translation.

⁷ Phil. 3:13.

⁸ Eccl. 9:10.

nourishment to break through. On the other hand, diligent labor gives rest to your brains and quickens the body. Thus the spiritual exercises have more emphasis and become sweeter. Hold yourself to set times of reading the Word of God and praying on your knees. Albeit as a mere natural work, like the papists, who hold to their set times. Because you want to do this work in a spiritual manner, you shudder from it, and sometimes this work is omitted. Not that I want you to be satisfied with that mere outward work, but I know that the Spirit manifests himself at that occasion, and I know that the things which are begun physical sometimes end up spiritual. Keep the exercises short, except when the Spirit comes mightily upon you. Stick with the godly, but hide your condition. But when you are recovered, then tell them what the Lord has done to your soul. If you have a faithful friend, a father in Christ, and if you have the occasion to speak with him, tell him about your condition and listen to his counsel. Be more laborious in going out to [i.e. coming to] Christ, to rest in him by faith, and be more laborious to let the Lord work in you, than in constantly seeking marks of grace. Beware, do not view all occurring things to be marks of grace, but let this all move you to perform outgoing acts [of faith, i.e. To come to, look unto Christ].

I have taken so much time in writing this long letter to you, out of love to the salvation of your soul. May the Lord, who is good and powerful, recover, comfort and revive you.

I am and remain your beloved in the Lord,

W. a Brakel.

Rotterdam,

1703

‘Tis a point I long to know

’Tis a point I long to know,
Oft it causes anxious thought;
Do I love the Lord, or no?
Am I His, or am I not?

If I love, why am I thus?
Why this dull and lifeless frame?
Hardly, sure, can they be worse,
Who have never heard his name!

Could my heart so hard remain,
Prayer a task and burden prove;
Every trifle give me pain,
If I knew a Savior's love?

When I turn my eyes within,
All is dark, and vain, and wild;
Filled with unbelief and sin,
Can I deem myself a child?

If I pray, or hear, or read,
Sin is mixed with all I do;
You that love the Lord indeed,
Tell me: Is it thus with you?

Yet I mourn my stubborn will,
Find my sin, a grief, and thrall;
Should I grieve for what I feel,
If I did not love at all?

Could I joy his saints to meet,
Choose the ways I once abhorred,
Find, at times, the promise sweet,
If I did not love the Lord?

Lord, decide the doubtful case!
Thou who art Thy people's sun;
Shine upon Thy work of grace,
If it be indeed begun.

Let me love Thee more and more,
If I love at all, I pray;
If I have not loved before,
Help me to begin today.

John Newton